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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000010

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KFLU KISL KWBG SA

SUBJECT: CATCHING UP WITH "THE FIRST WORLD": MECCA GOVERNOR KHALID AL FAISAL ON HAJJ, JEDDAH FLOOD, MECCA DEVELOPMENT, PALESTINIANS, KAUST AND KING ABDULLAH'S VISION

REF: A. 09 JEDDAH 274

1B. 09 JEDDAH 466

1C. 09 JEDDAH 488 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: In December 27 meeting with Ambassador, Governor of Mecca Region, HRH Prince Khalid Al Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (ref A), expressed his satisfaction with Hajj 2009 (ref B), which was not disrupted by the feared outbreak of H1N1 or significantly affected by the November 25 flash flood in Jeddah (ref C). The Governor recalled his efforts to develop internal tourism in the Asir region -- his previous governorship -- including a 20-year struggle to found a national park and outlined plans to expand Mecca's Holy Mosque and to construct a rail system to transport pilgrims. Prince Khalid urged the U.S. to solve the Palestinian problem and reiterated his previously expressed desire to see Saudi Arabia strive to catch up with "the First World." End summary.

HAJJ 2009 SUCCESSFUL DESPITE JEDDAH FLOOD

12. (C) Prince Khalid Al Faisal, Governor of the Mecca Region and Chairman of the Hajj Central Committee, receiving the Ambassador's congratulations on the Hajj and condolences on the flood victims, reflected on the success of the 2009 Hajj, over which the threat of an H1N1 outbreak loomed. His greatest concern during the pilgrimage was the rare and devastating rainstorm that moved through the Western Province of the Kingdom on November 25, the first day of Hajj. Prince Khalid said he had feared the downpour would cause massive flooding in the tent city of Mina, where millions of pilgrims reside during the Hajj. Fortunately, the dams put in place to protect the holy city contained the excess water and no pilgrims were injured on account of the rain. Some thirty years ago, the prince recalled, a flash flood had actually inundated the area immediately surrounding the Kaaba.

13. (C) As for the city of Jeddah, which was hit by catastrophic floods, the Governor acknowledged he had not expected such a disaster. Many of the hardest-hit buildings were in vulnerable valleys, natural wadis (dry river beds), in which construction, he acknowledged, should not have occurred or been permitted in the first place. Prince Khalid observed, with a tone of regret, that the city of Jeddah is expanding so rapidly that it has been impossible for the infrastructure to keep pace with the new and uncontrolled construction.

14. (C) Responding to Ambassador's comment about the large number of young Saudis who, in an entirely unprecedented way,

had volunteered to help flood victims, Prince Khalid said that many of the young people in Jeddah carry a deep sense of social responsibility and indicated how pleased he was by this development: "Even the girls are out helping." The prince noted that he planned to hold a reception to honor the young volunteers in the coming weeks. The Ambassador reminded the Governor that the United States stood ready to offer expert assistance and consultation the flood and drainage issues if the SAG requested help.

MECCA DEVELOPMENT: MOSQUE EXPANSION AND MONORAIL, BUT NO MORE PILGRIMS

¶5. (U) The Governor presented satellite images of Mecca as he reviewed the holy city's ten-year development plan, which includes massive expansion of the Mosque and monorail trains to transport pilgrims and connect Riyadh and Mecca. When asked if the development would allow for even more pilgrims, the Governor quickly responded negatively, stating his conviction that the SAG had reached the maximum practical limit with 3 million worshippers visiting to perform Hajj every year and that the country was already imposing strict limits on the number of times that Saudi nationals themselves could perform Hajj. (Note: the number of Hajj pilgrims visiting Saudi Arabia in 1968, according to available data, was 300,000. Thus, the current level represents a 10-fold increase in pilgrims in just over 40 years. End note.)

STRUGGLE TO DEVELOP TOURISM IN ASIR: 20 YEARS FOR A NATIONAL PARK

¶6. (C) Responding to Ambassador's request to compare his current post as Governor of Mecca with his previous governorship of the Asir Region, Prince Khalid said that both areas have their distinct merits. He noted that there is real growth in Asir and that many Asir residents who leave for other areas of the Kingdom, for education or work, soon

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return home. During his three-decade period as Asir governor, Prince Khalid said he had aimed to transform the area into a destination for local tourists. He recalled how he had worked with local and with American experts to create a national park near the regional capital Abha. Prince Khalid wryly noted that although the park cost only SR 40 million (\$10.6 million) to construct, it took him well over 20 years to make this dream a reality. Ambassador stated that he hoped trade and tourism would eventually mature in the Kingdom to the extent that Americans would be able to travel here freely and easily and thus learn as much about Saudi Arabia as Saudis know about the United States.

SOLVING THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM

¶7. (C) Turning to international issues, Prince Khalid told the Ambassador that the U.S. could help Saudi Arabia by "solving the Palestinian problem." Ambassador assured the Governor that President Obama is deeply committed to the Middle East issue and had identified it as the second major source of regional tension in his June 4 Cairo speech.

CATCHING UP WITH "THE FIRST WORLD"

¶8. (C) Concluding the meeting, the Governor expressed his oft-stated hope for greater progress and modernization in Saudi Arabia, saying that he fervently wanted to see the Kingdom exert in order to catch up with "the First World." In this context, the prince described three major periods in Saudi Arabian history: (1) the King Saud era in which the nation was established and unified, (2) the King Faisal era during which the nation was built up structurally, and finally (3) the current era in which King Abdullah is working to usher in rapid technological and social change throughout the Kingdom. Posing an open-ended, rhetorical question, Prince Khalid cited KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, north of Jeddah) as the leading example of King Abdullah's vision of the country's future: "With the establishment of KAUST, the First World is already coming to us. So what are we going to do?"

¶9. (U) Ambassador Smith has cleared this message.
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